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ABSTRACT

The merits of the video photo essay as a broadcast production teaching tool and as a genre of television news are examined in this paper. Suggestions are offered for using the video essay in the classroom, such as assigning students projects which involve producing a news story using only "nat-sound" and soundbites or music, and utilizing the video essay to recap newscast stories. Also discussed is the effectiveness of the video essay in terms of viewer recall of story information, which is enhanced by the video essay. It is concluded that the video essay as a form of broadcast news deserves further attention in research, in the teaching of broadcast production, and in the broadcast industry. (Contains 14 references.) (AEF)

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Teaching with and Learning from the Video Essay

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Teaching with and Learning from the Video Essay

Abstract

The authors examine the merits of the video photo essay as a broadcast production teaching tool and as a genre of television news. They offer suggestions for using the video essay in the classroom, such as assigning students projects which involve producing a news story using only nat-sound and soundbites or music, and utilizing the video essay to recap newscast stories. The authors also discuss the effectiveness of the video essay in terms of viewer recall of story information, with emphasis on how the video essay enhances free recall. The authors contend that the video essay, as a form of broadcast news, deserves further attention not only in research, but in the teaching of broadcast production and in the industry itself.

Teaching with and Learning from the Video Essay

In television journalism, the video essay serves as an alternative to the traditional narrative, or voice-over, mode of presentation. The term "photo essay" or "photo feature" traditionally refers to a story or article that features or comprises only photographs (Weiner, 1990). Its counterpart in broadcasting, the video essay, refers to a story told entirely with video, accompanied only by natural sound recorded on videotape, including soundbites or music. In this type of story, both auditory and visual channels may emerge as carriers of story line information, causing viewers to attend more closely to the story's visuals due to lack of narration.

Television professionals recognize the use of the video essay in television news as a valid method of presenting the "sights and sounds" of an event. Video essays exemplify Mayeux's (1996) sentiment: "Pictures provide details, illustrations, and visual information that may be too complex to put into words or too emotional to capture effectively in news copy only" (p. 247). Frequently, broadcast videographers reserve the video essay for light stories, such as human interest features, humorous items, or unusual happenings. One commonly might see a photo essay dealing with a day in the life of an entertainer, children making a snow man, a kite-flying contest, or a St. Patrick's Day parade, for example. Occasionally, video essays cover hard news (a nuclear protest march or a presidential inauguration), and intensely emotional stories and images (such as CNN's video essay on the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing).

Here we examine the merits of the video essay as a conveyer of audio and visual information, especially in terms of how broadcast educators can use the video essay to teach students journalistic as well as aesthetic skills. To

this end, we will define the video essay as a genre, offer suggestions for using it as a teaching tool, and discuss its merits as an alternative means of news presentation.

The Video Essay as Genre

As Rucker (1991) asserts, videotape gives photojournalists, or videographers, "more breathing space" (p. 51), and allows them to "express thoughts and feelings in their visuals" (p. 52). In the video essay, emphasis on visual quality increases, and, unlike most daily news items, videographers usually spend more time on the production of the video essay--making for higher overall production standards. The video essay incorporates conventions of sight and sound as in other news stories, but often videographers or editors stretch these conventions to their creative limits.

Sound

Natural sound (or nat-sound) provides a sense of realism and serves as the backbone of the video essay. In many video essays, nat-sound replaces the reporter voice-over as the main narrative element. Nat-sound often conveys the intense reality of the moment better than a reporter voice-over (Shook, 1989, p. 7). Of course, "good" nat-sound might not always be available. Nevertheless, it sometimes can be preferable to the voice-over.

Soundbites generally appear more often in video essays than in narrated stories. Interview sound comes from individuals who are active participants in the story, lending itself to greater subjectivity, and thus interest, than the reporter voice-over.

In addition to nat-sound and soundbites, videographers often include sound effects and music in video essays. When used as background, music can add to the atmosphere or mood of a piece. Music often accompanies

sports video essays, for example. Videographers may use music as a transitional device between scenes, or as the only audio track.

Visuals

News visuals convey a great deal of information viewers can absorb from a mere glance, as opposed to auditory information. Research indicates viewers believe visuals add realism to a story and increase the emotional impact of a news item (Graber, 1990). Compared to other forms of news presentation, video essays present more complex combinations of visual and auditory information.

Narrated news stories allow the viewer to listen mainly to the verbal channel and use the visuals to reinforce a story's message. However, the video essay delivers a story's message not by one (narrative) or two (narrative plus visuals) channels of communication. Instead, audience attention jumps back and forth between visuals, soundbites, nat-sound, and music. Thus, viewers have to work harder to follow the narrative flow of the video essay. In general, video essays heavily emphasize the visual channel, forcing greater viewer attention to the aesthetics of the shots.

Teaching with the Video Essay

When discussing the video essay in the classroom, we suggest a thorough understanding of narrated, documentary production style as the best starting point for teaching alternative ways of presenting the news. We suggest the following as ways to address the video essay as a production genre at the college (and even high school) level:

*showing examples of *cinema verite* and discussing optimum conditions for shooting specific camera angles, and ways to keep obtrusiveness to a minimum;

*analyzing non-news types of programming in terms of production quality and techniques (even elements of the music video genre appear in local and network newscasts);

*narrowly defining video assignments by prohibiting the use of music and/or narration altogether;

*assigning an exercise in which students script a sequence or two "using only natural sounds and visual imagery...that captures the moment and communicates a sense of experience about the subject" (Shook, 1989);

*using alternative production techniques in student newscasts, such as featuring a short video essay at the end of each newscast which recaps a top or entertaining story or addresses one not included in the newscast itself;

*assigning students to create a music video using news footage and appropriate musical background; and

*further defining the parameters of the video essay by limiting music to only one type (classical or jazz, for instance).

Taking its lead from the print media, television news presentation historically has used narration to lead the viewer through the beginning, middle, and end of a story. When teaching students the qualities of the video essay, instructors should emphasize visuals and nat-sound as equally important elements. Students should learn to analyze footage and listen to the nat-sound gathered in the field before thinking about adding narration. In many cases, narration may not be necessary at all. Indeed, the people involved in a particular event may tell a more compelling story than a reporter who uses the third-person perspective.

When assigning video essay projects, instructors should encourage students to use a "free-form" approach. Students shouldn't go out into the field with preconceived notions of how a story should be told, because a story's narrative elements may change based on the visuals and sound gathered. The videographer should be *listening* as well as looking for opportunities when seeking out video essay subject matter; interesting or emotional sound may be a cue to "roll" on a moment's notice as often as a visual scene. Once footage is "in the can," the videographer or reporter shouldn't be afraid to change the angle of the story to highlight its most dramatic sights and sounds.

Solid writing skills, a strong background in documentary style, and thorough knowledge of how to lead a viewer through a story with interesting narrative all provide important starting points for teaching television journalism. Once students demonstrate mastery of these skills, the instructor needs to emphasize the next step, one that may well launch a student's work into the realm of award-winning programming: the ability to tell a story using nat-sound and visuals. Reporters and videographers who understand how to incorporate alternative elements of storytelling--nat-sound, music, interview sound, and visuals--will have a clear advantage over those who depend on the narrative alone as the primary carrier of information.

Learning from the Video Essay

Research well documents the recall of narrated information from news items (Gunter, 1980; Drew & Cadwell, 1985; Reese, 1984; Edwardson, Kent, Engstrom, & Hofmann, 1992), and how viewer fixate on the verbal narrative, often to the exclusion of the visual information (Hazard, 1962; Katz, Adoni, & Parness, 1977; Drew & Cadwell, 1985). In particular, researchers have assessed the contributions of various story elements to learning from the verbal

narrative, such as type of cover footage (Gunter, 1980), jump-cut editing techniques (Drew & Cadwell, 1985), word-picture correlation (Reese, 1984), and soundbites and graphics (Edwardson, Kent, Engstrom, & Hofman, 1992).

Empirical research on recall of visual information (Drew & Grimes, 1987; Martin & Ditcham, 1987; Graber, 1990) provides a welcome shift from studies that deal only with learning from the reporter voice-over. While researchers have investigated narrated television news as a genre and its effectiveness regarding information gain, they have not examined the video essay as closely. To date, research measuring effects of the video essay on viewers' recall is virtually non-existent.

We believe the video essay offers researchers new paths of exploring the potential for increased learning from television news. We contend that because newscast viewers may not be entirely familiar with the forms and codes of the video essay, following the narrative story line may be more difficult and require more attention to the screen, especially if the visual channel carries the majority of the story information. As mentioned previously, both auditory and visual channels in the video essay may emerge as carriers of story line information; viewers' attention may switch back and forth between the two channels many times during the course of the story.

With such theoretical implications in mind, Gotfredson (1995) used the video essay format in a pilot study to investigate the effects of narration and lack of such on viewers' recall of a news story. Subjects were tested on their level of information gain from the visual as well as the auditory channels of a TV news story presented in two modes: one with narration (voice-over) and one without narration (video essay). The story, a human-interest feature, concerned a historical festival held in an old Western mining town. Free-recall test results indicated subjects remembered significantly more visual and

audio details from the story presented in the video essay mode than in the narrated mode (although aided recall scores were not significantly different between the two conditions).

These findings indicate that alternative methods of presenting television news can be at least as, and possibly more, effective in conveying information to the audience as the traditional, narrated news story. Because lack of narration in the video essay forces the viewer to look *and* listen to the story more intently, this type of visual presentation maintains higher viewer attention.

Conclusion

The video essay allows for more creativity and expression in terms of presenting visual information, whether it be hard news or features. Students who have the chance to work on video essays can learn how to get the most out of using pictures and sounds to tell a story. As they move into the fast-paced "real world" of television news, and television production in general, students who have shot and edited video essays naturally would have an advantage over those who have not.

Similarly, television journalists cannot afford to ignore new ways of presenting the news. Alternative TV presentations have the potential to attract new, diverse audiences, ones more comfortable with new ways of following television narratives. Eventually, these will make their way into mainstream television newscasts, resulting in what we hope will be new and more effective ways of conveying information.

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